

SEN Connections – How do students with special educational needs connect with the world?

Cross-curricular (SEN)

This resource will focus on connecting the world with SEN (special educational needs) students. Here are some of the techniques used to bring it into the lives and thoughts of students who have special needs. All of these techniques have been used in an SEN school where students have academic abilities between p1 and National Curriculum Level 2. The age range taught within the school is 11-19. However, these strategies, mostly focusing on simple activities and teaching through all of our senses could be adapted for both primary and secondary groups, and may help to make teaching certain concepts more memorable and accessible for all students.

In short, when students feel a disconnect with the world it can affect them as people, as they will have less grasp on who they are, where they fit in with society and how they relate to and interact with other people and environments. Through using these strategies that many students find engaging we can encourage a wider group of people to feel connected with the world, allowing them to understand the physical aspects of place and empathise with the human aspects. Only through an inclusive approach to geography teaching can we make geographical connections.

Activity one – What are areas like? - Developing imaginations and images of places

One of our greatest tools as geographers is aerial photographs. Through a combination of aerial photographs, photographs of plants and symbols my class were able to learn about the diverse ecosystems of South America. They easily matched the symbol showing the rainforest and photographs of the plants with the greenest areas. They also matched the photographs and symbols of sand and barren landscapes with the areas depicting the Atacama Desert. These activities, supplemented with videos, help form the student's geographical imaginations and knowledge of an area. Equally, this activity could be completed with students up to GCSE level, for example plotting all the case studies onto an aerial photograph and surrounding them with other smaller images and words that relate to a case study.

Activity two – Learning about countries with all our senses

When learning about a different country the focus tends to lie with traditions, customs and points of interest. Without low ability students we often teach through the telling of a story that uses many props that act as sensory stimuli. We often play a video alongside these stories, for example when teaching about China one video that could be used is <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zq6fgk7> to teach about Lijiang.

As the video plays, it can be paused at certain points to feel snow and ice as the mountains come on screen and to talk about the weather. The video could also be stopped at the fishing lake to give students an opportunity to role play fishing in class - this could involve feeling slippery fabric, plastic fish and nets.

These tactile opportunities can allow for opportunities that increase student's understanding and engagement. I also allowed the students to have the olfactory (smell) and taste experience of types of tea when this was shown on screen. Through having these sensory experiences that encompass the traditional 5 senses our least able students are given the opportunity to show sensory preferences and cooperate with staff members, while the most-able have increased memory retention of the topic.

Finally, on special days or lessons we can also recreate different environments both inside and outside the school. We have set up a gazebo outside in a playground as an igloo and classes have visited the tent to read a related story and explore the relevant artefacts, ranging from pictures and sensory animals to plants. Using sensory objects is a great way to make lessons more memorable - students are always excited to taste and use food in lessons. In addition, the olfactory sense has been strongly linked to aiding memory. There are many articles that write about this phenomena - try it to make your lessons memorable for all the right reasons! Smells that could be used include specific plants to an area, sweaty clothes when talking about factory production or even specific foods or spices of a region or country.

Activity three – Transport as an investigation

As many schools have done we have looked at transport as a discrete topic. When looking at transport we often use sounds and images to go with the words spoken by a teacher. My students enjoy guessing what mode of transport makes the sound I am playing - the more obscure of these include walking, an ice cream van and helicopters. Again, as with the geographical imaginations we also use symbols to support learning, and through the use of these symbols students are able to explain how they go to familiar local places such as the shops, school and to relatives' houses. Our more-able students are able to turn this survey data into graphs and with support write an analysis using a word bank.

Activity four – Emotional Mapping and exploration of familiar places (KS3)

Within KS3 geography lessons, initially we focus on familiarising ourselves with the school including different learning bases, classrooms and resources. Many of our students use objects of reference, which are a way of communicating where we are going within the school, for example by exploring a microphone or bells on the way to the music room; another example is holding a towel that smells of chlorine on the way to the hydrotherapy pool. Other students use photographs, so we show them the room before assisting them there. We also have familiar symbols on all classroom doors, alongside switches that say the room name when pressed by the student. When travelling around the school students quickly work out their favourite rooms. Some groups have gone around the school with a map, drawing on faces onto all the areas that make them happy. This allowed our students time to reflect how they felt in each place and some could give reasons for their emotions in certain areas.

Activity five – Weather - creating a weather map

We often talk about the weather in tutor time. Activities range from learning Makaton signs for different weather conditions to linking the weather report with a map with pre prepared symbols that we can stick on in class. Some students also link the weather to the clothing or equipment we will need if going outside, for example identifying sun cream for hot weather or an umbrella and coat when raining.

Links

The Sensory Room article www.sln.org.uk/geography/Documents/The%20sensory%20room.doc
Smells and Memory <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-babble/201501/smells-ring-bells-how-smell-triggers-memories-and-emotions>